



A New Language for Today's Cuban Theatre

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In response to the new Cuban economic reality of the 90s, there is a new language being used today to discuss the goals of Cuban theatre. Terms like financial autonomy, convertibility, productivity, profitability, promotion, and marketability are common in theatre circles. In this “*período especial*” (“special time”) in Cuba, when everyone has been asked to do more with less, and when funding for the arts has been cut, the performing arts are faced with such challenging questions as: how to find economic formulas which will make the Cuban stage marketable, or at the very least, pay for itself; how to achieve an economically effective theatre without making artistic compromises; or where to find alternative sources of funding for artistic projects and for the preservation of the technical infrastructure of the theatre. These questions have given rise to some creative and innovative proposals from an artistic community accustomed to over thirty years of economic paternalism. State subsidy of the arts, part of the cultural revolution in the early 60s, has provided a certain degree of economic stability for professional artists over the years and has also provided an environment which has enabled the theatre to continue its development, however qualitatively irregular that development may have been on occasion. Since 1991, it has been increasingly difficult for the Cuban theatre to sustain the high level and quality of the work produced initially by the graduates and professors of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) established in 1976.

The creation of a system of “*proyectos*” by the Consejo Nacional de Cultura in 1989 did help to counteract the stultifying effects of an existing economic infrastructure which conditioned Cuban theatrical activity to a routine wherein artistic creation had become a simple contract remunerated punctually and routinely; however, the “*projects*” system created another problem for the 90s – too many groups (each project ended up constituting itself into a collective with its own stylistic identity) for the number of facilities available.¹ Since each of these approved projects is entitled to funding for its

duration (from one to five years), the economic stability of the theatre movement has begun to erode and quality control has deteriorated since those projects which are not approved and therefore not funded, continue to operate as groups and occupy the limited spaces.² Other events in the 90s have further exacerbated the already deteriorating economic situation and under the present economic circumstances, the performing arts and Cuban culture in general are having to struggle for survival and continued development.

In a recent trip to Cuba in June of 1997 as part of the Scholars in Cuba program of Arizona State University, directed by Dr. K. Lynn Stoner, I had the opportunity to speak with many people, some of them associated directly or indirectly with the theatre, and some simply theatre "aficionados," and it soon became apparent that the theatre is experiencing some serious specific problems as a result of the current national economic pressures. Stagings in Havana have become limited to the weekends, functions are sometimes postponed or unexpectedly terminated due to frequent and sudden electrical "paros" (brownouts), and attendance at performances has declined, the latter due not only to the uncertainties of electrical power outages but also to the difficulties involved in transportation.

Travel by bus or "canello" (a type of bus so termed because of its resemblance to a camel with two humps), often entails more than one transfer to a given destination. During weekdays, problems resulting from insufficient carriers and rationed fuel have given rise to something called "hacer botella," roughly urban hitchhiking, in order to arrive at work or appointments on time. On the weekends, when stage performances are scheduled, this type of ride-sharing is limited; therefore, in a country where attendance at performing arts functions has traditionally been very high since the Revolution, a definite and serious commitment to attend a performance has to be made, and spending time and money to attend a function only to find that it has been canceled or to have it interrupted by an electrical failure, can daunt even the most serious aficionado.

Less funding, fewer resources and fewer performances for smaller audiences have presented serious problems for the Cuban stage during this "special period"; however, the Consejo Nacional de las Artes Escénicas (the CNAE) has been working on creative solutions to these current economic difficulties. The CNAE, a group of cultural institutions, was created in 1989 by the Ministry of Culture to promote and develop the arts in terms of creation and circulation of productions, research, and publications. Under the direction of the well-known Cuban actress, Raquel Revuelta, the CNAE was responsible for everything related to theatre and dance in Cuba: national and international

programming, the formation, information and updating of both areas, and any activity which could contribute to the development of a well defined policy for theatre and dance productions. Under increasing pressure to alleviate the expense of subsidizing the arts, the CNAE, now under the direction of the Vice Minister of Culture, Lecsy Tejeda del Prado, has recently tried to redesign all national activity related to theatre and dance to achieve financial autonomy. Toward this end, the CNAE has outlined a series of eight global tasks for itself:

1. Assess each artistic proposal in terms of its promotional viability.
2. Examine the most contemporary promotion and publicity tools in an attempt to update the introductory profiles of the various dance and theatre groups.
3. Study the dynamics of international marketing channels and the most up-to-date means of marketing artistic products.
4. Evaluate the potential of business fairs as platforms for launching an international marketing effort for artistic projects.
5. Identify the most relevant events and festivals which could constitute promotional channels in a highly competitive market.
6. Introduce Cuba and the CNAE into highly visible, prestigious international organizations linked to the administration of the performing arts.
7. Take maximum advantage of all possibilities that could structurally constitute sources of short or moderate term income through specifically designed projects.
8. Institute structural changes so as to promote and market Cuba's artistic product on both national and international levels.

The latter goal has led to the recent creation of three new organs within the CNAE: Escenarte, La Agencia Artística de las Artes Escénicas, and Eventos y Festivales. The first, a marketing agency for artistic productions and cultural assets, is charged with increasing the financial resources of the institution by identifying and organizing international tours, developing business ventures of different types, advertising professional services, negotiating authors' copyrights, and channeling and focusing the attention of foreign investors on a variety of artistic projects. The second agency is in charge of promoting and marketing individual artistic talent to areas of high demand such as movies, radio and television. The third, devoted to events and festivals, is in charge of organizing and managing the Festival de Teatro de La Habana – Cuba's primary international artistic event in the performing arts, setting up the program of festivals and events scheduled for the period

1995-2000, and designing the strategy of the participation of Cuba's groups in the International Calendar of Festivals and Events which, besides being a source of exchange and discussion for its artists, can serve as a promotional platform for marketing the nation's artistic groups in different arenas.

In addition to these global strategies, the CNAE is in charge of locating and evaluating all potential human and/or material resources which could be organized in terms of commercial use through the development of new cultural projects like El Palenque (a new center located in the headquarters of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba) which will offer a variety of gastronomic and other services to the public, all directly related to authentic traditional values of popular Cuban culture; an Atelier-Boutique specializing in articles related to theatrical activity; a teaching program designed to institute a series of 30 courses yearly at the graduate level offered by Cuban and international specialists at reasonable prices in the future Centro Cubano de Especialización de las Artes Escénicas.³ It is expected that these activities will contribute to the financial autonomy of artistic activity in general as well as to the creation in Havana of a permanent meeting place for high level professionals in the field of the performing arts: "*Creatividad, talento y búsqueda . . . son las premisas que marcan el trabajo del movimiento escénico cubano en esta adversa pero especial coyuntura económica en que nos encontramos y de la que seguro saldremos adelante*" (Amaya Quincoces 20).

The marketing strategy outlined by the CNAE marks a new phase in the development of revolutionary Cuban theatre. Encouraging artists to try to find ways to participate in international activities which will generate economic benefits in terms of easily convertible monies without making any artistic concessions or compromises is not easy. Whether the playwrights, directors, and actors are in accord with the new economic thrust proposed by the CNAE and what effects this strategy will have on the thematic and stylistic development of Cuban theatre remain to be seen. At any rate, the new economic language being used to discuss the future of the performing arts in Cuba appears to indicate that the era of art at the service of the Revolution has come to an end.

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Notes

1. According to conversation with different people associated with the theatre, there are now around 61 recognized groups and only 48 established facilities. Some groups like the Teatro Buendía and the Teatro Obstáculo work out of an apartment or out of an old church.

2. Presently there are discussions concerning how to institute some kind of system to monitor the quality of artistic activity among the projects.

3. My conversations with Bobbi Rivero, Coordinator of the Centro Cubano de Especialización de las Artes Escénicas, indicate that plans to coordinate these course offerings at the Centro with national and international festivals and events are in place and the CNAE is looking forward to the upcoming International Theatre Festival in Havana this coming September, and to the National Theatre Festival in Camagüey next year.

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